

For Students of Behavior Analysis

Encouraging Applied Behavioral Theses in Nonbehavioral Programs

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Heward, Heron, and Cooper (1990) discussed the characteristics and the benefits of the master's thesis in applied behavior analysis. However, Heward et al. (1990) discussed the thesis from their perspective as behavioral faculty in a program that enrolls many graduate students and offers the master's and doctoral degree. I will provide a slightly different perspective on the master's thesis in applied behavior analysis based on my position as the only applied behavior analyst in a small psychology department (11 faculty) with a two-year master's-only graduate program that graduates just six to eight master's students per year. There are probably numerous behavior analysts working alone in similar circumstances for whom this perspective is relevant. In this paper I will discuss (a) program requirements that facilitate completion of the thesis, (b) conducting the applied behavioral thesis, and (c) working with a nonbehavioral thesis committee.

Program Requirements That Facilitate Completion of the Thesis

North Dakota State University has a clinical and an experimental master's program in psychology with a strong emphasis on research. All master's students in the program are required to conduct a data-based thesis in their second year. The program incorporates a number of requirements designed to facilitate successful completion of the master's thesis. First, students are required to take most of their courses in the first year so that

there is more time in the second year to conduct the thesis. Second, students are required to complete a review paper in the summer prior to their second year. This paper is a comprehensive literature review, which the student subsequently pares down and forms into the introductory chapter of the thesis. Furthermore, the students' teaching and research assistantship stipends in the second year are contingent on the successful completion of the review paper. With this contingency, all students complete their review papers and get started on their theses in a timely fashion. Third, students are required to write a detailed thesis proposal involving complete introduction and method chapters and then to defend it before a committee of four faculty members. Once the proposal is revised according to the committee's recommendations, it accounts for 50% of the final thesis manuscript. After the thesis is conducted, the student has only to add the results and discussion chapters to complete the manuscript. This greatly facilitates completion of the thesis. In the 6½ years I have taught in this program, only 1 of 40 students has failed to complete the master's thesis.

Conducting the Applied Behavioral Thesis

The program has a more traditional clinical orientation toward group research methodology and students get exposed to single subject research designs only as one part of the larger research methods course. Although there is no research methods course for applied behavior analysis per se, students who take my courses in specific content areas (e.g., behavior therapy, developmental dis-

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abilities) are exposed to behavioral principles, procedures, and research methods. Given this limited exposure, students who conduct applied behavioral theses under my supervision must develop more sophistication in data collection, data management, and research design before proposing the thesis. Students learn this in either (or both) of two ways: A first-year student will function as a research assistant for a second-year student conducting an applied behavioral thesis with me, and/or the thesis student will read the Bailey and Bostow (1977) research methods handbook and discuss it with me in advance of the thesis.

Students in a small master's only program such as this are also at a disadvantage because there are no Ph.D. students to supervise their thesis work. Actually, it may be more accurate to say that the faculty member is at a disadvantage because she or he must spend more time directly supervising the student. This is usually accomplished through weekly meetings, but I have found that, for an applied behavioral thesis, an open door policy is also necessary for the crises, questions, and methodological decisions that must be addressed immediately over the course of the study. In addition, because only one or two students do an applied behavioral thesis with me each year, it is impractical to conduct the type of thesis seminar described by Heward et al. (1990). The result of these factors is that each thesis student receives frequent direct supervision from the faculty supervisor. I believe this level of supervision contributes to quality theses. Of the eight applied behavioral theses I have supervised, three are published, with two in press, two under review, and one in preparation. All have been presented at ABA or AABT conferences.

One advantage of conducting an applied behavioral thesis in this small master's program is that the student has an opportunity to become adept at teaching and managing undergraduate research assistants. My thesis students collect data and intervene in an applied setting over the course of 4 to 6 months using 6 to 10 undergraduates who receive independent

study credit for their participation. The thesis student must select assistants, train them, schedule them, monitor their performance, and "motivate" them. This proves to be an invaluable experience for the thesis student in subsequent research and applied positions. This experience also benefits the undergraduate assistants, many of whom develop an interest in applied behavior analysis and become involved in future projects of applied behavioral research, applied job or practicum experiences, and even graduate programs.

Working with a Nonbehavioral Thesis Committee

Supervising theses in a program that has no other applied behavioral faculty has proven to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, other faculty may not fully appreciate or understand applied behavioral research design and may require the student to make some changes in the thesis that are unnecessary or antithetical to good applied behavioral research methodology. On the other hand, the field of applied behavior analysis may become elevated in the eyes of nonbehavioral faculty who sit on a thesis committee, especially if the thesis project is conceptually solid and well run. Furthermore, nonbehavioral faculty often provide fresh perspectives on the project.

I have not found it difficult to supervise applied behavioral theses with nonbehavioral committee members. As long as the thesis students have been prepared to fully explain and justify the ideas or methods in their theses, I have rarely had to intervene in their efforts to convince other committee members of the soundness of particular thesis ideas or methods. It is also rare for other committee members to require changes or additions that substantively affect a thesis. Of the changes that are requested, most often another committee member will require that the student conduct a statistical analysis because the committee member is uncomfortable with visual analysis of the data or because she or he believes that it is good for the student to do the statistics.

It seems the most important steps a student can take when defending a behavioral thesis before nonbehavioral faculty are to: (a) design a solid behavioral thesis, (b) be well prepared to address conceptual issues in the proposal meeting and thesis defense, and (c) have the support of a behavioral thesis advisor. Unless the faculty members in a department are hostile to applied behavior analysis, I believe a student should have no trou-

ble proposing and conducting an applied behavioral thesis.

REFERENCES

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